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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 002838

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT PANEL POSTPONES MILF PEACE TALKS

REF: MANILA 1337

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Paul W. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The head of the Philippine government's peace negotiation panel has postponed for two weeks planned exploratory talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front scheduled for August 22 in Malaysia. The postponement was necessitated by the Cabinet's inability to reach a consensus on what lands would be included in the planned Muslim autonomous region in Mindanao. Some Cabinet members sought input from Congress in the drafting of a charter for a Muslim homeland. Separately, the head of the government peace negotiation panel noted the importance of renewing the mandate of the International Monitoring Team (IMT), which expires September 8. End Summary.

¶2. (C) A top official on the government peace panel, executive director Ryan Sullivan, attributed the two-week delay to the Cabinet's inability to reach a consensus on an agreement laying out what lands would constitute the new Muslim political entity. According to Sullivan, panel chairman Rodolfo Garcia was concerned over returning to the negotiating table with no clear mandate and recommended to President Arroyo August 18 that an executive session be held among himself, chief MILF negotiator Mohagher Iqbal, and a Malaysian facilitator in place of exploratory talks. Although President Arroyo agreed to the executive session, the MILF and Malaysia did not. Consequently, the talks were postponed, said Sullivan.

¶3. (C) Sullivan noted that the disagreement within the Cabinet centered on three key issues: self-determination, territory, and governance for the Muslim political entity. Sullivan said that a serious effort would be made over the next several weeks by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process to bring along the full Cabinet. Despite prodding by President Arroyo to pursue the peace process and peace talks, Sullivan noted that the Cabinet remains deeply divided over the creation of a new autonomous Muslim political entity. "If we can't reach a consensus for an ancestral domain agreement, the government and MILF will have to wait until the next administration, but we do not know what will happen with certain elements of the MILF in the meantime," Sullivan worried.

¶4. (C) Some Cabinet members wanted input from Congress in the drafting of a charter for the new Muslim political entity. Sullivan expressed concern that such Congressional input would undermine self-determination, which President Arroyo had already promised. One issue was the insistence of some Cabinet members that a plebiscite be held at the provincial rather than local level, which might keep some Muslim communities in neighboring Christian-dominated

provinces from joining the Muslim autonomous region.

¶ 15. (C) Sullivan also noted that the postponement could have an impact on renewing the mandate of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao, composed of Malaysia, Brunei, Libya, and Japan, which expires September 8. In addition, he noted that Malaysian Major General Dato Ismail Khan's tenure as the IMT's head ends on August 28, shortly before the mission's mandate expires. With the planned retirement in early October of another key peace process official, Government Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities chairman Edgardo Gurrea, some personnel responsible for coordinating peace process mechanisms are in flux.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: The government appears to be seeking broader support for its negotiating position, within the executive branch and congress, and finding consensus more difficult than expected. The issues are politically divisive and difficult, in Manila and among local Muslims in Mindanao. We will continue to encourage all sides to press ahead toward a negotiated agreement under Malaysia's facilitation.

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